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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SEOUL 000314

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ECON ETRD ENRG KNNP KS UZ

SUBJECT: MOFAT AND UZBEK AMBASSADOR ON KARIMOV VISIT

REF: A. TASHKENT 73
¶B. SEOUL 2
¶C. 09 SEOUL 1435

Classified By: POL M/C James. L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary and Comment

¶11. (C) Summary: The MOFAT DDG who covers Central Asia told us that during the February 11 summit between Presidents Lee and Karimov, the Uzbek leader pressed MB to hire Korean-speaking Uzbek laborers and engineers to work on the ROK's 40 billion USD nuclear power plant project in the UAE. Lee asked Karimov to give preferential tax treatment to any ROK companies that invest in a free trade zone near Navoi airport. As sign of the close relations between the two leaders, and as a nod to Uzbekistan's large ethnic Korean community, MB and the First Lady hosted the Karimovs for a rare private lunch in a special Blue House pavilion. Uzbek Ambassador Vitali Fen told Ambassador Stephens that Karimov was "very pleased" to hear that GM-Daewoo would partner with Uzbek automaker UZAVTOSANOAT to assemble a small passenger vehicle for sale in emerging markets. Fen also confirmed that MB did not raise the sensitive issue of permitting cargo aircraft to fly from Navoi to Afghanistan.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: Our MOFAT interlocutor confirmed that President Lee did not raise the issue of human rights with Karimov, whose government is routinely criticized by the United Nations for significant human rights violations. End summary and comment.

Karimov Pushes for Slice of the UAE Deal Pie...

¶13. (C) Echoing what Embassy Tashkent heard from the ROK ambassador (ref A), MOFAT European Affairs Bureau Deputy Director General Yang Joong-mo, whose portfolio covers Central Asia, characterized Uzbek President Islam Karimov's February 10-12 visit to Seoul as mostly focused on economic and commercial issues. During his February 11 summit with President Lee at the Blue House, Karimov pressed MB hard on the issue of hiring Korean-speaking Uzbek laborers and engineers to work on the ROK's 40 billion USD nuclear power plant project in the UAE (ref B). According to DDG Yang, President Lee was noncommittal, pledging only to "study the issue."

...and Urges MB to Make Navoi's Case to ROK Businesses

¶14. (C) According to Yang, Karimov also called on MB to lobby the ROK business community to invest in the Free Industrial Economic Zone (FIEZ) near Navoi airport. President Lee

agreed to "push the business community" to do more in Uzbekistan, Yang related, but also asked Karimov to give preferential tax treatment to ROK companies that invested in the FIEZ. DDG Yang added that Karimov asked MB for additional Korean investment in a major gas field and chemical plant; MB ducked those requests, but did tell Karimov that imports of Uzbek cherries would get a tax break.

Atmospherics

¶ 15. (C) DDG Yang emphasized that this visit further strengthened the already close personal relationship between MB and Karimov. Yang noted that this was the 15th high-level visit between the two countries since 2006, including President Lee's visit to Uzbekistan last May. As sign of the close ties between the two leaders, and as a nod to Uzbekistan's large ethnic Korean community (ref C), Yang said MB and the First Lady hosted the Karimovs for a private lunch in a special Blue House pavilion.

Uzbek Ambassador's Take

¶ 16. (C) Uzbek Ambassador Vitali Fen, the dean of Seoul's diplomatic corps, emphasized to Ambassador Stephens that there was "excellent chemistry" between Karimov and MB. According to Fen, the Uzbek president also had solid, substantive meetings with the prime minister and the mayor of Seoul, who discussed with Karimov plans to open a "Seoul Park" in Tashkent. Karimov was also very pleased to hear

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that GM-Daewoo would partner with Uzbek automaker UZAVTOSANOAT to assemble a small passenger vehicle for sale in emerging markets.

¶ 17. (C) Fen confirmed that, despite rumors in the ROK media ahead of Karimov's visit, MB did not raise the issue of permitting cargo aircraft to fly from Navoi airport to Afghanistan. (Note: DDG Yang emphatically denied that MOFAT was the source of the press rumors and suggested that Korean Air, which flies into Navoi and would welcome an opportunity to fly cargo into Afghanistan, was the source of the stories.

End note.)

TOKOLA